Horse Pasture Management

Dan Morrical
Iowa State University

Horse pasture management is similar to managing pasture for any other species. Unfortunately for many acreage owners, they are horse rich and pasture poor. In other words the land base of the acreage does not support all the horses owned by the family unit. Over stocking and continuous grazing pastures are the two biggest mistakes horse people make.

There are multiple methods to increase pasture management. The first step is to determine how many horses to stock on the pasture. High producing categories like lactating mares should have at least two acres per mare. Young horses can get by on less area, but realize they should be heavily supplemented to insure appropriate growth and development. Continuously grazed pastures should have lower animal densities than rotationally grazed units.

Fertilization of horse pastures is the quickest and easiest means of increasing forage production for horses to consume. Most pastures have evolved to bluegrass and weeds. This is due to overgrazing and blue grasses ability to survive repeatedly close grazing or overgrazing. Weeds exist because horses generally do not eat them and secondly the pasture sod is not dense and healthy to prevent weed seedlings from getting established. Since most horse pastures are composed of cool season grasses like blue grass, the most important nutrient is nitrogen. Nitrogen application rates should be from 40 - 150 pounds annually. Precautions need to be taken that applications exceeding 50 pounds per acre should be applied in split applications. One could apply 60 pounds of N in early April, 40 pounds in mid June and another 40 pounds in mid August. This fertility program helps to even out the growth rate and keeps pasture stands healthy and vigorous.

Rotational grazing generates more forage for horses because the pasture sward is healthier. Rest periods allow time for recovery and rebuilding plant vigor. Additionally, leaf area to capture sunlight is improved resulting in increased solar energy conversion to plant energy. Pasture rotations are restricted by fence and water resources. Electric fencing make light work of subdividing grazing areas so that pasture plants can rest and recover. Water availability is more expensive, but carrying water for a couple of horses or using temporary watering devices connected to heavy duty garden hoses is another possibility. One should not let the challenges of fencing and water distribution hold back implementation of a rotational grazing system.

Prepared for the 2002 Iowa Grassland Conference

What plant species your pasture contains is dependent on the pasture management not the initial seeding mixture. Endophyte infected fescue should be avoided in ones pasture mix. Fescue seed is cheap and bulk pasture mixes will contain quite a bit of fescue. Read the tag and ask questions before seeding down the pasture. Without appropriate management most horse pastures become primarily an exercise lot not a source of economical feed.

There is not one simple horse pasture management recipe. Being well read and understanding forage growth is the start to healthy attractive horse pastures. Below are a list of articles on the web for additional reading.

Manure and Pasture Management for Recreational Horse Owners
http://www.extension.umn.edu/distribution/naturalresources/components/7540_05.html

Horse Nutrition Bulletin 762-00, Pasture Management, Ohio State University
http://ohioline.osu.edu/b762/b762_19.html

Horse Pasture Management, Rutgers University
http://www.neosoft.com/~iaep/pages/protected/jissues/j1909/j1909p540.html

Pasture and Hay for Horses, Penn State University
http://www.agronomy.psu.edu/Extension/Facts/agfact32.pdf